

The Overlooked Presence of Heteronormativity at the John F. Kennedy School of Berlin

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ABSTRACT

Heteronormativity - defined by sociologist Heidi M. Gansen as the notion that heterosexuality is the superior and most natural form of sexuality - plays a crucial role in perpetuating the discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community (Gansen, 2017). Within the institution of education especially, heteronormativity has proven to be a detrimental presence to LGBTQ+ students (Wilkinson, 2009). The aim of this study is to identify the factors perpetuating heteronormativity at John F. Kennedy School (JFKS), a bicultural, German-American school located in Berlin, Germany. Additionally, this research seeks to compare the experiences of LGBTQ+ students versus heterosexual-identifying students at JFKS. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected from 14 student interviews, 1 administrative interview, and an online questionnaire, I was able to synthesize a conclusion using content analysis. Content analysis allowed me to establish 4 thematic categories, each of which contributed a key idea to the conclusion. Ultimately, this study found that the two main factors perpetuating heteronormativity at JFKS were a lack of LGBTQ+ representation within the curriculum and homophobic language. Additionally, LGBTQ+ students generally had more negative social interactions and experiences with peers than heterosexual students did. As a school, JFKS can utilize these results to implement solutions that specifically target the two main factors perpetuating heteronormativity, therefore working towards confronting the discrimination experienced by its LGBTQ+ students.

Introduction

From the moment of birth, gender becomes an identity that is imposed upon everyone; in fact, most infants - through declarations such as “It’s a girl/boy!” - are immediately assigned a gender based solely on their physical anatomies (their genitalia). These assigned gender identities - “girl” or “boy” - place certain behavioral expectations upon children, enforcing the notion that gender is strictly limited to identifying as a woman or as a man (Kearns, 2017). This narrowed perception of gender is closely intertwined with the pervasive, restrictive concept of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity describes the notion that heterosexuality - the attraction between different sexes or different genders - is the superior and most natural form of sexuality (Gansen, 2017). This creates a misconstrued idea of identity in which gender and sexuality are portrayed “in terms of oppositional binaries and hierarchical power relations (e.g., man/woman, straight/gay)” (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). These rigid dichotomies assume and expect heterosexuality, automatically placing any non-heterosexuals into a position of inferiority while placing heterosexuals into a place of privilege.

Such notions of “correct” sexuality first stood out to me when the phrase “no homo”¹ was used within my own highschool environment, effectively sparking my curiosity in the heteronormative atmosphere I faced every day. This catchphrase caused me to question why such language - which was clearly offensive to the LGBTQ+² community

¹ “No homo” is short for “no homosexuality,” which is used by people as a disclaimer to assure others that they are not homosexual; usually used after giving someone of the same gender or sex a compliment or affection

² The frequently-used acronym LGBTQ+ stands for “Lesbian” (women attracted to women), “Gay” (men attracted to men), “Bisexual” (people who aren’t exclusively attracted to only one gender), “Transgender,” and “Queer” (a

- was so normalized, especially considering the fact that my highschool, John F. Kennedy School (JFKS), had always portrayed itself as an advocate for racial *and* gender equality. It was ultimately these personal observations that inspired me to focus my inquiry on how heteronormativity is perpetuated at JFKS, a bicultural/bilingual German-American school in Berlin, Germany. It's important to note that the severity of heteronormativity is unique to every school; however, given the fact that all of Berlin's bicultural schools operate under the same administrative system called the *Senat Schulgesetz*³, trends uncovered at JFKS - a school which sets the standard for all of Berlin's bicultural schools through its top *Abitur*⁴ scores - reveal the heteronormative tendencies that Berlin's *other* bicultural schools face as well.

The Issue of Heteronormativity

The relevance of heteronormativity stems from the fact that it permeates into the institution of education, and therefore, into JFKS as well; *all* schools tend to "mirror the dominant beliefs and structures of society, including and especially the norms and behaviors associated with "acceptable" sexuality." (Gansen, 2017). Consequently, highschools are critical environments to consider when pursuing the confrontation of gender inequality, as they're responsible for ingraining societal norms into the minds of its adolescent students. JFKS specifically is an important site for this research because of several factors. Firstly, according to the International Schools Database, JFKS is one of the most renowned bicultural schools in Berlin, meaning that JFKS plays a crucial role in setting the standard for Berlin's bicultural education system (2021). Because JFKS is such an integral part of Berlin's educational framework, the trends uncovered at JFKS give important insight into the shortcomings of Berlin's *other* bicultural highschools as well. Moreover, I wanted to explore the true nature of heteronormativity at JFKS not just because it's my own highschool, but because JFKS labels itself as a very inclusive school, including traits such as "open-mindedness," "diversity," and "respect for the personal rights ... of others" in its core values (JFKS Administration, 2021). This inspired me to investigate the extent to which this claim to inclusivity was actually true by proposing the following research question: how is heteronormativity perpetuated at JFKS, and how do these heteronormative tendencies influence LGBTQ+ highschool students' experiences versus those of heterosexual highschool students?

For reference, I'm looking at the concept of gender through the lens of Queer Theory - an academic, interdisciplinary area of study that investigates any themes relating to LGBTQ+ topics - which concludes that gender refers to a person's roles, behaviors, and expressions based on a certain gender identity they consider themselves to be (Kearns, 2017). Since my research closely aligns with gender and sexuality, Queer Theory's conceptualization of gender, which states that "gender [is] fluid, expansive, constructed, and performative," is highly relevant in this study's context (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). This definition of gender is not yet fully accepted; gender is still often falsely conflated with sex, which is a *separate*, biological label that does not necessarily line up with gender identity, disproving the assumption that gender and biological sex are synonymous terms (Newman, 2018). Additionally, a narrowed idea of sexuality is still nurtured in education through the presence of heteronormativity in high schools, and "[when] heteronormativity acquires more legitimacy and power, [it] limits available outlets for adolescent sexuality and stigmatizes same-sex desire" (Wilkinson, 2009). Evidently, the confrontation of heteronormativity in

person who is still questioning their sexuality or wants to avoid specific labels). The purpose of the plus symbol (+) at the end is to acknowledge the presence of many more identities.

³ A collection of Berlin's legal guidelines and laws concerning all schools in Berlin, which encompasses school organization, subject curriculums, legal requirements of students, student rights, etc.; it provides the legal framework for Berlin's school system

⁴ *Abitur* is the German equivalent to the American highschool diploma; it is a qualification granted to the student at the end of secondary education, given that they pass a set of exams

education must be initiated, which starts with understanding how a particular school environment - in this case, JFKS' school environment - perpetuates heteronormativity.

Literature Review

In order to further understand the relevance of looking at highschool environments such as JFKS, inspecting already-existing research is important. A study by Dr. Laura-Lee Kearns, professor of education at the University of Toronto, found that, in American classrooms, children were “divided [into ‘boys’ and ‘girls’] with little room for fluidity or a range of [gender] behaviors,” suggesting that teachers play a significant role in perpetuating heteronormativity by reinforcing the rigid gender dichotomy of “boys versus girls” (2017). This study helped spark my curiosity in heteronormativity by depicting the powerful relationship between the school environment and the consequent gender dynamic of the students. It highlighted the role that certain pedagogical tendencies - such as teachers splitting children up into “boys” and “girls” - play in constructing societal expectations of “correct” sexuality. However, while Kearns explicitly addresses heteronormativity in their research, their study focuses primarily on the teacher perspective. Teachers are the main source of data, whereas my research revolves around the perspective of LGBTQ+ students, comparing their experiences to those of heterosexual students in order to understand the heteronormativity perpetuated at JFKS.

Similarly, a study by Dr. Heidi M. Gansen - a sociologist specializing in education, social inequalities, and gender and sexuality amongst youth - explores how heteronormativity influences students as early as preschool (2017). The results confirm that preschoolers learn and reproduce heteronormative behaviors in their daily play, showing that there are clearly societal norms being introduced to students *through the school environment* from a very young age (Gansen, 2017). So, like Kearns, this study confirms the relationship between the school environment and the gender expressions of children; together, Kearns and Gansen hereby solidified my interest in the topic of heteronormativity and its powerful influence. Gansen’s study, however, is also limited in scope, because it focuses on the specific age group of preschoolers and therefore doesn’t represent the perspective of more matured individuals. My research differs, because it aims to understand heteronormativity in JFKS’ *highschool* environment, which includes *adolescents* and therefore provides the perspective of an alternative age group.

Other literature, such as a study by Alan Horowitz, coordinator of Out For Equity (a national program supporting LGBTQ+ youth), and Miriam Itzkowitz, director of the Trauma-Informed Care Institute at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, emphasized the severity of the issue that heteronormativity causes. Through a Nationwide survey of 7000 middle and high school students in America, this study concluded that 84.6% of LGBTQ+ students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% being physically harassed, and 18.8% being physically assaulted (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011). Through such statistical evidence, Horowitz and Itzkowitz confirm that heteronormativity makes LGBTQ+ students prone to becoming victims of discrimination. A similar study by Dr. Joseph P. Robinson, a university professor specializing in research and policymaking for LGBTQ+ youth, and professional psychologist Dr. Dorothy L. Espelage confirms Horowitz and Itzkowitz’ research by determining that “sexual minority youth ... tend to have higher rates of negative psychological and educational outcomes than do straight youth” (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Together, these two studies expose the damaging nature of the heteronormative framework by depicting how it inherently places LGBTQ+ children into positions of inferiority, making this a damaging, highly relevant issue.

Nevertheless, both of these studies are limited because they primarily focus on the effects of *bullying* on LGBTQ+ students. They do not take into account how LGBTQ+ experiences are influenced by the practices of the school itself. Consequently, they do not describe *how* heteronormativity is perpetuated within those schools, which is what this study strives to explain. Additionally, both studies had a much broader scope of inquiry, as they statistically investigated multiple schools in North America with a student sample of more than 7000 students. Contrarily, my research moves away from this broad, statistical approach by honing in on *one* school to give a more in-depth perspective of a school’s relationship with heteronormativity.

So, while previous literature has presented the detrimental relationship between heteronormativity and American students, this study - through the perspectives of both LGBTQ+ *and* heterosexual students in highschool - addresses the specific factors that preserve heteronormativity in a bicultural/bilingual school environment in Europe (unlike past research, which pertained to English-speaking schools in North America). Specifically, my research questions (1) how heteronormativity is perpetuated at JFKS, and (2) how these heteronormative tendencies influence LGBTQ+ students' experiences versus those of heterosexual students. Additionally, because JFKS is located in Berlin - a city that is known for its cultural, racial, and sexual diversity - researching JFKS will help give crucial insight to the level of openness in Berlin's bicultural school atmospheres (UNESCO⁵, 2001). This study is therefore an important cultural investigation, not only because JFKS is an integral part of Berlin's school system, but due to Berlin itself being a cultural and social hotspot in Europe.

Methods

In order to investigate the heteronormativity at JFKS and incorporate multiple perspectives, this study employs both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach includes a preliminary survey, a questionnaire, and structured interviews involving 14 students and 1 administrator. The student interviews serve as the main source of data for this research, since the students' firsthand accounts about their personal experiences are crucial to answering the research question.

Preliminary Survey

In order to proceed with the interviews, it was important to first find a student sample. Students who were willing to participate in an interview had to be identified, which was accomplished through a brief 5-question survey asking for students who were interested in speaking about their LGBTQ+ related experiences at JFKS. The survey was digital and received 72 responses in total. It was sent to all highschoolers at JFKS, which, according to Berlin's school system, encompassed grades 7-12. This survey's additional purpose was to collect the students' contact information; if the student agreed to an interview, they had to provide their emails before submitting their survey response. Although this survey was preliminary and didn't directly provide qualitative or quantitative data to answer the research question, it made the research process possible by identifying my student sample.

Structured Student Interviews

The structured interviews - which served as the main method of data collection for my research - were conducted with 14 students who were all asked the same 25 questions. The goal of these interviews was to gather and compare the experiences of LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students. *Structured* interviews specifically were the best option, because they, by definition, follow a strict set of predetermined questions; "such uniformity of questions and answers can greatly aid in the constant comparative process," which made this method optimal for this study since my research objective involved a comparison between two different student groups (Atkinson, 2017). The table below identifies each student interviewee and their corresponding background information. The numbering for each interviewee makes their quote citation in the analysis section easier.

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Table 1: Interviewee Identification

<i>Student #</i>	<i>Context</i>
1	LGBTQ+ (Questioning), grade 11
2	LGBTQ+ (Bisexual), grade 11
3	LGBTQ+ (Queer), grade 11
4	LGBTQ+ (Questioning), grade 11
5	LGBTQ+ (Bisexual), grade 11
6	LGBTQ+ (Pansexual), grade 10
7	LGBTQ+ (Queer), grade 9
8	Heterosexual, grade 11
9	Heterosexual, grade 11
10	Heterosexual, grade 11
11	Heterosexual, grade 11
12	Heterosexual, grade 11
13	Heterosexual, grade 10
14	Heterosexual, grade 7

<i>Group 1 - LGBTQ+ Students</i>	<i>Group 2 - Heterosexual Students</i>
# 1-7 (7 students)	# 8-14 (7 students)

Of course, the experiences of 14 students can't possibly represent the experiences of all JFKS students, since everyone has their own unique stories; however, interviewees' experiences were only included in the findings if those experiences were *shared* by the other interviewees. By only analyzing experiences that were shared among a significant portion of the student sample (by at least 6 out of 7 students per group), I was able to identify general trends based on the *most common* experiences mentioned, which therefore likely also apply to other students at JFKS. Additionally, it should be noted that the number of LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students is equal; 7 interviewees identified as LGBTQ+ and 7 as heterosexual. This ensures that there isn't a majority in one group of students, which would create a bias towards the larger group since their perspective would be represented more if they had more students. This imbalance within the data would make the conclusion less honest, which is why an equal number of students was maintained in both groups.

The singular administrative interview was conducted with the American administrative head of JFKS' highschool department, the principal. A set of 6 open-ended questions were prepared, which had the purpose of gaining context for JFKS' activity concerning the LGBTQ+ community from an official, administrative perspective. All of

the questions asked about what policies and programs JFKS has set into place to support its LGBTQ+ students. While important to the research, the admin interview only acts as a supporting source of information and context; the focus of this research is still on the student perspective, *not* on the administrative perspective.

Content Analysis

To interpret the qualitative data collected from the structured interviews, content analysis was employed. Content analysis determines the presence of common themes, ideas, and patterns in a sample of qualitative data, which are then organized into thematic categories. The purpose of these categories is to reveal the key ideas that ultimately answer the research question, making content analysis a “replicable and valid method for making specific inferences from text” (Mayring, 2000). Content analysis accomplished this by identifying common themes among the responses of the 14 students and establishing corresponding thematic categories, which allowed me to identify the factors perpetuating heteronormativity at JFKS and then compare the students’ experiences.

This was accomplished through a 2-step process. First, the interview transcripts were read through, and codes - which are labels used to define what the data is about - were applied (Gibbs, 2007). This coding process effectively grouped together similar ideas by identifying common evidence. Once all codes were established, the codes which appeared most frequently were grouped into a total of 4 categories, each category representing a main idea found in the interview data. Any irrelevant codes that appeared during analysis - such as recollections from elementary school, which do not apply to the *highschool* atmosphere at JFKS - were discarded. Because this study’s objective was to figure out (1) how heteronormativity is perpetuated within JFKS, and (2) in which ways the experiences of LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students differed, content analysis was the best method of analysis since the 4 established categories revealed the 4 key ideas needed to answer the research question; Categories 1 and 2 revealed the two most prominent factors perpetuating heteronormativity, while Categories 3 and 4 showed the differentiation between the experiences of LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students, thus fulfilling both aspects of the research objective.

Questionnaire

Besides the structured interviews, an online questionnaire was employed to gather quantitative information on the highschool student body, receiving a total of 126 responses. This questionnaire was conducted using the survey program Google Forms and uncovered general trends within the experiences of students at JFKS. It primarily asked about the frequency at which students hear homophobic phrases - such as “no homo” - in school. A questionnaire that could be sent out digitally was optimal, because it could be directed towards *all* students in highschool, thereby increasing my sample size. Additionally, in light of the current COVID-19 restrictions, digital data collection proved safe and effective.

The questionnaire responses will be presented through a simple depiction of quantitative data in the form of percentages. Further statistical analysis of the questionnaire is not necessary, since the main source of research comes from the qualitative student interviews, not from the quantitative questionnaire results; this questionnaire data only serves to *corroborate the findings* found in the student interviews by identifying general trends amongst the JFKS student body. This is because the actual detailed experiences of the students are most accurately depicted through qualitative research provided by the nuanced, in-depth accounts of the interviews rather than the general, quantitative data from the questionnaire.

Findings

Student Interviews

Prior to analyzing the data provided by the structured interviews, definitions for each thematic category were clarified in the table below, along with their corresponding codes. From the student interviews, a total of 4 categories were established. These categories were chosen based on the recurring themes that emerged throughout the coding process.

Table 2: Definitions of Categories & Codes Used

Category	Definition	Most Frequent Codes in Content Analysis
Curriculum Inclusivity	Refers to the level of LGBTQ+ representation incorporated within lessons (within the school system/ <i>curriculum</i>), i.e. during sex-education, english literature or ethics classes, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of LGBTQ+ content in lessons - Negative LGBTQ+ representation - Some LGBTQ+ content in classes
Homophobic Language	Refers to commonly-used linguistic expressions (catch phrases) that imply being against homosexuality and therefore, against the LGBTQ+ community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examples of homophobic phrases from students
School Climate/Atmosphere	Refers to the students' perception of the social school climate in terms of <i>how comfortable</i> being at JFKS feels <i>emotionally</i> , specifically in regards to expressing one's sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive perception of atmosphere - Negative perception of atmosphere - Depression - Isolation and Self-harm
Personal Interactions	Refers to students' anecdotes/experiences involving either positive or negative social interactions with students and teachers, i.e. having preferred pronouns acknowledged by a teacher or having pronouns blatantly disrespected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive student interactions - Negative student interactions - Admin/teacher interactions - Pronouns not respected

Administrative Interview (with JFKS' high school principal)

The structured interview conducted JFKS' principal provides necessary context regarding JFKS' involvement with its LGBTQ+ students. Table 3 depicts the summarized key points of information from the principal's responses about

JFKS’ administrative history and tendencies. This qualitative data helps contextualize the conclusions derived from the student interviews about heteronormativity at JFKS.

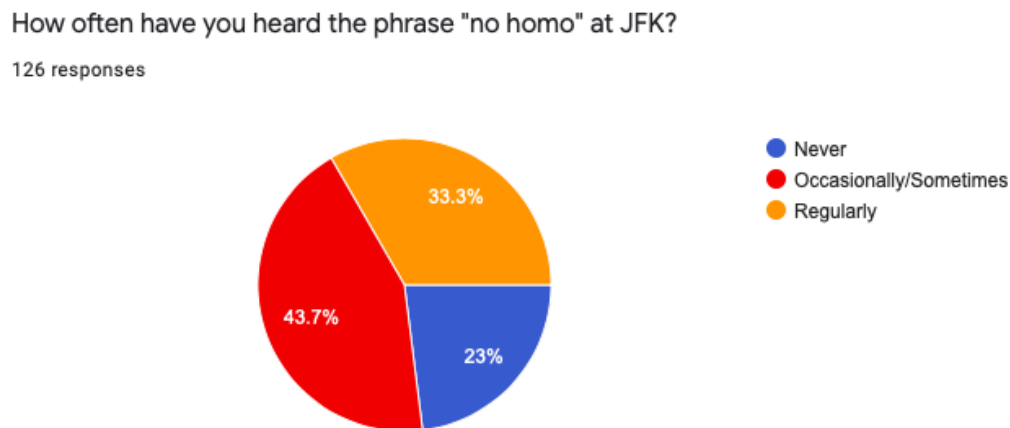
Table 3: Summary of Key Information

Topic	Summary of Response
Curriculum	LGBTQ+ topics are hard to fit into the curriculum due to its rigidity and lack of time. The school is nevertheless open to more inclusion. The legality of making administrative changes to the curriculum is also difficult, since JFKS must follow legal guidelines given by the <i>Senat Schulgesetz</i> .
Inclusive Workshops	JFKS had an Interrupting Oppression workshop, which included LGBTQ+ topics. Additionally, admins and teachers participated in an online workshop with Harvard University which partially addressed LGBTQ+ issues.
LGBTQ+ Discussion	LGBTQ+ topics are “not something that’s discussed” amongst the administration. Teachers ask for pronouns as part of school culture, but it’s <i>not</i> a requirement.

Questionnaire

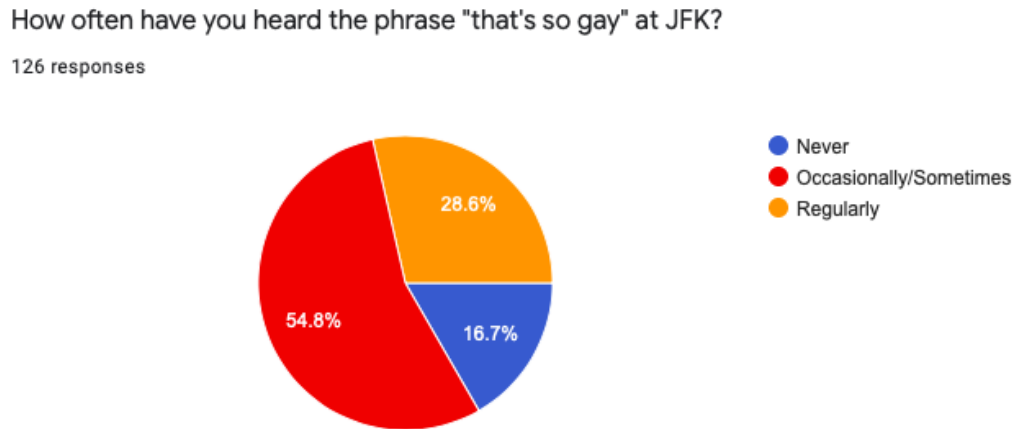
The quantitative portion of this research is expressed through the percentage results of the online questionnaire. Simple depictions of the most important data are shown through Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: “How often have you heard the phrase “no homo” at JFKS?”



Here, 33.3% answered “regularly” and 43.7% answered “occasionally,” winning a clear majority over those who had never heard the phrase “no homo” at school. Together, 77.0% of students who answered have heard this phrase either occasionally or regularly.

Figure 2: “How often have you heard the phrase “that’s so gay” at JFKS?”



Here, 28.6% answered “regularly” and 54.8% answered “occasionally,” meaning that a total of 83.4% of students have heard this phrase either regularly or occasionally at school. Again, this wins a clear majority over the 16.7% of students who haven’t heard this phrase at JFKS.

Results/Analysis

The data collected through the structured interviews described the experiences of students and, through content analysis, all accounts were separated into 4 distinct categories (whose definitions can be found in Table 2). These 4 categories help answer (1) how heteronormativity is perpetuated within JFKS, and (2) in which ways the experiences of LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students differed. This section discusses the results of the content analysis and the subsequent conclusions that can be drawn from those outcomes.

Category 1 - Curriculum Inclusivity

The first theme prevalent within the interviews was the discussion of the LGBTQ+ representation within JFKS’ curriculum. To this, there was agreement amongst *all 14* interview participants that there is a blatant lack of discussion surrounding the topic of gender and sexual diversity. As LGBTQ+ Student 1 stated, “[LGBTQ+ topics are] not in the curriculum, and I’ve never heard anyone teach it.” From the heterosexual group, Student 8 remarks, “I don’t really think the curriculum is trying to talk about this topic at all, and we’ve only talked about this topic as a side comment, not even in official instruction.” This observation is supported by all students from *both* groups (Students 1-14), emphasizing the reality that non-heteronormative identities aren’t currently integrated in the curriculum. The administrative interview with JFKS’ highschool principal supports this claim by mentioning that LGBTQ+ topics are “not something that’s discussed” amongst the administration, “not because we don’t care,” but because “it didn’t pop into anybody’s mind.” This further confirms that there is a general absence of LGBTQ+ inclusivity at JFKS, even from the administrative point of view.

Although there was consensus amongst the entire student sample in regards to the *lack* of LGBTQ+ material in the curriculum, the experiences of LGBTQ+ students still differed from those of heterosexual students. Firstly,

LGBTQ+ students (Students 1-7) picked up not only on the lack of representation, but also on *negative* representations of the LGBTQ+ community, while heterosexual interviewees (Students 8-14) did not consider negative portrayals of LGBTQ+ people to be an issue. Student 4 shared their experience in which, we started talking about different kinds of families there are [as part of the lesson], and of course, [the teacher] started talking about the "rainbow family," and not in a good way. As in, "Oh, who's the guy, who's the girl?" [...] Even if [LGBTQ+ people] are represented, it's in a really offensive way, like portraying gay people as overly sexual, like taking their shirts off. It was overall really uncomfortable.

Additionally, LGBTQ+ Student 7 noticed that, "in a textbook, it said that female and male were the only two *genders*, and I got so mad." This observation - that curriculum materials such as textbooks misrepresented the concept of gender by falsely conflating gender with biological sex - was corroborated by all six other LGBTQ+ interviewees (Students 1-6).

Clearly, LGBTQ+ face worse conditions in terms of representation, which even negatively impact their emotions at school, as shown by the fact that Student 4 explicitly states feeling "really uncomfortable," and Student 7 revealing that they "got so mad." By contrast, 5 out of the 7 heterosexual interviewees - the majority - saw no issues with the potentially *negative* LGBTQ+ representation in the school's curriculum, commenting, "I didn't see any problems with that" (Students 8-14). The fact that LGBTQ+ students feel uncomfortable with the representation they're given through lessons suggests that LGBTQ+ are at a disadvantage when it comes to having respectful representation of their non-heteronormative sexualities. This suggests that the curriculum, with its *lack* of LGBTQ+ representation, is a noteworthy factor contributing to heteronormativity, since the curriculum seems to favour heterosexual representation.

Category 2 - Homophobic Language

The second theme, encompassing homophobic language, found that all 14 students recalled the following phrases in their interviews: "No homo," "Ha! That's kinda gay," and "That's *so* gay." Clearly there's still a noticeable presence of homophobic language, as every interviewee produced the same examples of homophobic phrases. This observation is further supported by the questionnaire results (Figures 1 and 2). According to Figure 1, 77.0% of students have heard "no homo" either regularly or occasionally at school. Similarly, Figure 2 reveals that 83.4% of students have heard "that's so gay" either regularly or occasionally at school. These statistical majorities further confirm the presence of homophobic language at JFKS.

Interestingly, LGBTQ+ students remarked that these instances were quite frequent, while heterosexual students believed homophobic language to be more of an occasional occurrence. For example, LGBTQ+ Student 4 commented that "I've heard *a lot* of people use [homophobic phrases]," while heterosexual Student 11 commented that "people at our school use "gay" as an insult, I would say, occasionally, not frequently." The six other heterosexual interviewees shared this perception, using the phrases "it's not super frequent," "it isn't prevalent," and, "I haven't heard it a lot" (Students 8-10, 12-14). The fact that the majority of the heterosexual students perceived homophobic language to be *less* frequent suggests that homophobic language is normalized enough to go unnoticed amongst the heterosexual student population. Since homophobic language is inherently founded on the idea that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexuality, the normalization of this inherently homophobic language *encourages* heterosexual dominance, therefore making homophobic language another significant factor perpetuating heteronormativity at JFKS.

Category 3 - School Climate/Atmosphere

The third thematic category found that all 7 LGBTQ+ interviewees agreed that JFKS has an accepting school climate, with Student 4 remarking, "I think for the most part, it's really good and I'm surrounded by a lot of really accepting people, and we have certain teachers that are super accepting"; however, all 7 LGBTQ+ students still reported feeling

the presence of heterosexual dominance at school, saying that it contributed to their mental health issues. Student 3 mentioned that “in terms of mental health, it can be really isolating and really upsetting.” The six other LGBTQ+ interviewees voiced similar experiences in regards to the negative effect of JFKS’ heteronormativity on their mental health, mentioning isolation, depression, and even self-harm (Students 1-2, 4-7).

By contrast, heterosexual students never reported feelings of discomfort within the school environment, with 5 out of 7 heterosexual students (Students 9-11 and 13-14) denying the presence of heteronormativity in school at all. As Student 9 explained, “I personally don’t think [JFKS] is heteronormative. I don’t think the students are that heteronormative, I think it’s relatively accepting.” The 4 other heterosexual interviewees who agreed described the level of heteronormativity at JFKS using similar phrases; for example, Student 14 stated, “I would say JFK doesn’t really have a problem with [heteronormativity]. I would say that JFK is pretty accepting of pretty much everything.” This indicates that the general comfort level for heterosexual students is relatively high, as they labeled JFKS as “pretty accepting” on multiple occasions. This disparity of experience is significant, because the fact that LGBTQ+ students consistently felt worse than heterosexual students indicates that heterosexuality is still favored in JFKS’ social atmosphere, hinting that a heteronormative framework - which inherently benefits the *heterosexual* standard - still exists.

Category 4 - Personal Interactions

Finally, the two student groups presented contrasting experiences regarding personal interactions: LGBTQ+ students had more frequent negative interpersonal experiences regarding their sexuality than heterosexual students, further proving that heteronormativity is a lingering force within JFKS. For instance, LGBTQ+ Student 6 shared:

“Last year we had a big sale for GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance Club), and in the end we were just dancing to some really good music with pride flags and stuff. And, a lot of people were glaring at us, and some of them even called us slurs.”

Such experiences were also common for the other LGBTQ+ students interviewed. Other negative interactions included being subtly mocked in locker rooms while changing (Student 4), being oversexualized or fetishized by classmates (Students 2,3,4,6), or having others invalidate and ignore changed pronouns (Students 2,3,7). Interestingly enough, although all 7 heterosexual students could not recall any negative instances which affected them personally, they acknowledged that LGBTQ+ students do not have the same privilege that they do. When asked if they had experienced any negativity from teachers or students, heterosexual Student 12 explained:

“Because I am straight, no. I think that it’s really unfortunate that straight is kind of used as the norm, and that then means that if you belong to the norm, you will be left alone in your peace.”

This response - which was shared by 4 other heterosexual interviewees (Students 8,10,11,13), who recognized that they escaped gender discrimination precisely because they were heterosexual - confirms from the heterosexual perspective that heterosexual students face no negativity based on their sexual identities. Additionally, the fact that they were able to identify this privilege indicates that there is a general level of awareness and acknowledgement amongst the heterosexual student population, offering hope for future change within the student body.

Limitations

Before the conclusion is presented, it’s important to understand the potential factors limiting this study. Due to external circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, parts of this study were slightly restricted. For example, COVID-19

sanitary restrictions limited accessibility to students from grades 7-9. Therefore, the distribution of interviewees in relation to grade level leaned more towards grade 11, since this was the only grade I was allowed to interact with in-person. Because there are more 11th graders than any other age-group in the student sample, their perspective is represented more than other grade levels, which could impact the accuracy of the qualitative data. Additionally, it's clear that 14 individuals cannot represent *all* of JFKS' students; however, the accounts of these 14 students *do* give insight on the general trends that other students may also be experiencing and shed light on some of the heteronormative tendencies that currently still exist. Since this research is also based on human recollection, natural human error should be taken into account. Examples of this include the clouding of judgement due to emotional sensitivity and skewed memory, both of which decrease the accuracy of the qualitative data.

On another note, the online questionnaire should be treated as *supplementary* research only, not as undeniable or professional statistical data. Its goal was simply to identify very general quantitative trends to support any qualitative observations from the interviews. The questionnaire's role being subordinate is especially important to remember when considering the technological limitations of Google Forms, the program used for the questionnaire. Google Forms occasionally malfunctioned, preventing some students from accessing the survey, which also decreased my sample size.

Lastly, it should be noted that this study's results are specific to JFKS; every school is different with varying levels of heteronormativity, so conclusions drawn about JFKS may not fully apply to Berlin's other bicultural schools. Fortunately, this limitation leaves significant room for future research in this field. Additionally, context given by JFKS' principal during their interview must also be considered. The principal confirmed that the legality of making administrative changes to the curriculum is often difficult, since JFKS must follow rigid legal guidelines given by the *Senat Schulgesetz*; nevertheless, they reassure that JFKS is "open to more" when it comes to including LGBTQ+ topics in JFKS' lessons. Additionally, the principal mentioned that JFKS has participated in an Interrupting Oppression workshop and in an online workshop with Harvard University, both of which addressed LGBTQ+ issues. So, although JFKS struggles with the stubborn presence of heteronormative behavior, there is hope for improvement due to the open-mindedness portrayed by the principal and JFKS' involvement in LGBTQ+ workshops.

Conclusion & Implications

With these results and limitations in mind, a conclusion based on all 4 categories from content analysis was synthesized to answer the research question. The first part of the question – *how* is heteronormativity perpetuated at JFKS? – was answered by Categories 1 and 2, which identified a lack of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the curriculum and homophobic language to be the two most prominent factors maintaining heteronormativity at JFKS.

The second part of the research question, involving the comparison between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students' experiences, was answered by Categories 3 and 4, which found that the school climate and personal interactions were perceived more negatively by LGBTQ+ students. This disparity of experience between the two student groups - LGBTQ+ having consistently worse experiences than heterosexual students - suggests that heteronormativity still has a powerful foothold in JFKS' community, since heterosexuality is implicitly favored in the social environment.

This conclusion has various implications for future improvement at schools in Berlin. Firstly, now that the main factors fueling the heteronormativity at JFKS have been identified, small-scale solutions targeted *specifically* towards the two factors identified by Categories 1 (curriculum inclusivity) and 2 (homophobic language) can be implemented at JFKS, allowing for more precise - and therefore more *effective* - progress. Alternatively, further research can be conducted to expand and replicate this investigation on a larger scale, perhaps to non-bilingual Berlin schools such as German *Gymnasiums*⁶. This would help raise awareness to the struggles of LGBTQ+ youth not just at JFKS, but within all areas of Berlin's school system. Finally, this research could also be replicated using a more pedagogical approach by focusing on altering the *Senat Schulgesetz* curriculum to actively and respectfully represent

⁶ *Gymnasium* refers to the monocultural/monolingual German high schools (which are taught only in German)

the LGBTQ+ community. With such goals in mind, Berlin can work towards a school environment that bravely confronts restrictive expectations of gender and sexuality, fostering a more open-minded and empathetic school community.

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